

Dear Charlie,-

You were very good to take so much trouble with the printed sermon I sent on. I already owed you a letter when yours of April 25th came. I read it with interest.

On page four you seem to me to strike the key-note of the liberal theology. You say with reference to the Virgin Birth- "I find it unreal, not coincident with experience, hence not helpful". Dr. Fosdick has a similar phrase: "the heart of the Bible is ...its reproducible experiences". Apply that consistently and you empty the Scriptures of everything but their moral teachings, and you make many of the principles of ethics obscure and vague. I do not know whether it is a "reproducible experience" that turning the other cheek is a satisfactory basis of action or not. I think it might be hard to find a subject who would stick with the experiment long enough to be sure.

Philosophically this principle leads you straight to a solipsism. When you say experience you mean your experience because that is the only experience you know. So you trim up the world of truth to what you can experience, and that, you say, is all that is true for you. A fellow minister in my presbytery said the same thing the other day. He said, the resurrection gives me a great inspiration, but the virgin birth story gives me none. Ergo, the virgin birth story is unimportant and permissibly untrue. But here is an interesting hiatus in liberal thought. It came to light in our examination of a candidate for ordination. We asked him if he believed ~~the~~ the virgin birth. He said, yes, once, and no once, and then tried to say both that he believed it, but did not think it important. Now, there is a vast difference between believing the fact and estimating its importance. But it is very seldom that a liberal will answer your question. You ask him if he believes the fact, and he answers that it is not important. That is no answer at all. I felt like reminding my brother minister here that he sounded to me like a man who says he gets inspiration out of the fourth amendment to the constitution which protects a man against loss of his property without due process of law, but gets no inspiration out of the eighteenth amendment. That is

exactly the attitude of the ethical liberalism of a large number of people in the country to-day. But you say that both items are part of the law of the land. I say that the facts recorded in the Bible are recorded as facts and must be affirmed or denied, as facts.

You measure everything by what you can experience. But suppose a man with a very limited experience. Will you allow him to trim your universe of truth down to the dimensions of his experience. Will you allow those cave dweller of blessed memory that Socrates (the first) talks about, establish the norms of truth for you who may be privileged to live out in the open world which they have never seen?

The liberal in religion has abandoned objective truth and has sought within himself the norm and final judgement seat. But Christianity was founded on objective truth. It was the facts that produced the experiences, and if you will read the records of apostolic preaching, you will discover that the apostles spent ninety per cent. of their time talking about what Jesus was and ten per cent. of the time telling about what he did. They preached very palpably a religion about Jesus, and made no effort to inculcate in men's minds the religion of Jesus. ~~xxxxxx~~ Dr. F. has tried to make this simple phrase a basis for his position. But historic Christianity has always been a religion about Jesus. The religion of Jesus, well, what was it? It is only by a misuse of terms that you can say that Jesus had a personal religion. He never worshiped God. He never confessed his sins. He never made sacrifice for himself. He communed with His Father. He was made sin for us. He fulfilled all righteousness. But you can't live, or even try to live His religious life. You can be a Christian, but you recognize that that is ~~xxx~~ not like being a Platonist, for example. No, your religion is about Jesus, how he came into the world, died and rose again, how he ever liveth to make intercession for us, how he taught us to live showing our love for him, by keeping his commandments. That religion rests on facts. They are independent of your experience or ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ that of anyone else. Those facts are true or false. They were true or false ten years ago, or two thousand years ago. They were not true then and untrue now. All this talk about "mental frameworks" and "categories of thought" is just madness. You cannot reproduce one single item of that record. But you accept it on historical

grounds and hearing the Gospel story, you believe and become a confessor of "this same Jesus".

When time enough has elapsed to give people a chance to ~~get into~~ ^{give} this liberalism an incisive intellectual analysis ~~of it~~, ^{they are} going to shoot it full of holes. As Dr. F. well says, it is utter sentimentality. He says that is its danger. It is its death knell. Liberalism is going down before a new philosophy of common sense.

Coincident with this intellectual investigation of the foundations of liberalism there is going to be a determined effort made to make the liberals get out and hustle for themselves. Liberal movements historically have only seemed to prosper while they were allowed to cling to the old trunks. No avowedly liberal denomination has ever prospered and the denominations to-day, so-called evangelical, are prospering just in proportion to the conservative elements in them. Your own Congregationalism is beginning to go back. A record before me shows that you only gained some 3,000 members in 1924, i.e. ~~xxxxx~~ only advanced in total membership that much. Our church is pretty well filled with liberalism and our records show it.

There is a kind of experience that does tell that is not your personal experience or mine, but the experience of the ages, and that proves beyond caveat that the Christian has not moved an inch from any single great belief. Science changes like the chameleon, but science is in swaddling clothes. What an utter non sequitur argument it is to say that because a text book on biology gets out of date almost before the ink is dry, therefore the Bible ~~must~~ be a collection of "out-worn categories of thought". That is putting the guess of a man against the dicta of God, or on a par with it.

CHARLES E. DUNN
28 WIGGLESWORTH STREET
MALDEN, MASSACHUSETTS

25th April, 1925

MINISTER OF THE
MYSTIC SIDE CHURCH

Dear Stew-

Thank you for sending me a copy of your sermon on "The Word Made Flesh", which is an able statement of the conservative position, and which I read with interest. I thought you would like to have my reaction, which is that of one who does not find, unlike yourself, the doctrine of the Virgin Birth either important or necessary. I have given a lot of study to this question, and I hope that I have maintained an open mind in the rather fierce, and certainly futile controversy that has raged around it.

Let me briefly touch on some of the points you raise. I do not think that you fairly state the reason given by dissenters from the doctrine, when you say that ^{their} dissent is based on the fact "that it is only recorded by two of the evangelists." The opposition has weightier grounds. As Dr. William E. Barton, one of our most distinguished Congregational ministers and scholars says, in a most excellent article entitled "A Common Sense View of the Virgin Birth", published in "The Christian Century" for February 28th, 1924, "the story of the virgin birth as recorded in the gospels is detachable from the original apostolic tradition." Furthermore, as Barton shows, the very gospels that give the virgin birth data also give a genealogy that traces the birth through Joseph, not Mary. And, as Barton well states, the virgin birth is no part of the teaching of Jesus, of His brothers James and Jude, of Peter, or of Paul. And Barton might have added that it is no part of the Johannine tradition. Now I realize the danger of the argument from silence. I do not say that Jesus and His disciples did not believe in the Virgin Birth. What I do insist is that they did not con-

MINISTER OF THE
MYSTIC SIDE CHURCH

sider it important or necessary. If they had, they would certainly have said so.

I doubt also if it is fair to say that "only in rarest cases does a full, free and unequivocal belief in Christ as the Son of God exist where there is denial of the Biblical report of His birth." I think of the leading men in my own Communion, men like Dean Brown, Rockwell Potter, George A. Gordon, and William E. Barton, just quoted; and I think of leading Presbyterians such as W.P. Merrill and Henry S. Coffin, men whom I know well, and whose evangelical faith and temper cannot be successfully challenged, and all of them men who do not consider the Virgin Birth vital. I have attended numerous ordinations and installations in the past few years, and I do not remember a candidate who was not evangelical in his faith. Yet none of them stressed the Virgin Birth. I suppose that they are therefore unsound from your point of view, but they do believe in Christ as the Son of God. Harry Fosdick, around whom the present storm centers, stated his faith in the Deity of Christ, in the inspiring communication he sent to the New York Presbytery. But Fosdick ~~lays~~ attaches no importance to the virgin birth. I say all this because I think that the conservatives ought to be absolutely fair in their attacks on the liberals. The liberals, taking them as a whole, are evangelists in the best sense of the word. They do adore Christ as the center of their thinking, and the conservatives ought to recognize this, despite their theological differences.

Again, I cannot at all agree with you in tying up the Deity of our Lord with the Virgin Birth. I am thor-

oughly convinced that Barton is right when he says that "the doctrine of the divinity of Christ does not depend upon the question of the virgin birth." There is a fallacy in this insistence upon origins. Jesus was what He was independ^{e nt}ly of the particular manner in which He emerged into the world. To quote Barton again: "To affirm that the incarnation could only have come without a human father is to limit God in a way that we have no right to do." Bishop Lawrence was sound when he said, in his now famous address last year, that the virgin birth is not essential to the Incarnation. You say: "If you banish the Virgin Birth, you put Jesus right into the common stream of sinful humanity." This has always seemed to me a weak argument. Mary was a sinner, was she not? If Jesus was born in the flesh, He became a part of sinful humanity, whether he was born of a virgin or in the natural fashion. I believe in His sinlessness, but I feel sure that you don't solve the mystery of that sinlessness by the virgin birth explanation. Those who cannot accept the virgin birth tales as history are not thereby endeavoring to lower the historic importance attached to the person of Jesus. On the contrary, I think it is fair to say that they are trying to exalt Christ by bringing Him close to reality. The chief difficulty, to my mind, about the Virgin Birth, is its unreality. It isn't primarily a question of miracle. The Incarnation is a miracle no matter how you explain it. As Dr. W.J. Dawson well says: "If man believes it (i.e., the Virgin Birth), he believes in a great miracle; and if he believes in a divine Christ who entered the world by the ordinary processes of generation, he believes in A YET GREATER MIRACLE." The capitals are mine. I am not afraid of

miracle. I do not oppose the virgin birth simply because it's inexplicable. All life is, at bottom, inexplicable. But I do find it unreal, not coincident with experience, hence not helpful. And there are multitudes of ministers who, like myself, are in the same boat. Let me be more specific on this point: I believe, in common with most Christians, that sexual intercourse is a holy act. I do not believe that celibacy, or virginity, is superior to marriage. Now emphasis upon the Virgin Birth certainly tends to upset this whole notion. Look at the Roman Catholic Church, where the doctrine is applied not only to Jesus, but to Mary, and where absolute chastity is exalted as the ideal status of human life. I think it is pertinent to say, with Barton: "God himself ordained the family. When God saw fit in the fulness of time that the best and noblest of men be born, did he honor or ignore that institution? And if he ignored it, why did he not make it plain that he had done so, and why?" The most miraculous and holy act in the world, to my way of thinking, is the birth of a new born babe, in the ordinary fashion, coincident with the sacred laws of biology. Nothing is more wonderful to me than such a genesis. I like to think that when our Lord came into the world He honored the family relationship as it existed when the laws of biogenesis were formulated, laws which are still absolutely valid, and, so far as we can see, will forever be valid. The virginity story brings into life, in my judgment, an unreal element, and casts, if taken seriously, a certain disparaging reflection upon the institution of marriage.

Finally, my investigations do not lead me to see any "slander and shame" involved in drawing historical par-

CHARLES E. DUNN
28 WIGGLESWORTH STREET
MALDEN, MASSACHUSETTS

5)

MINISTER OF THE
MYSTIC SIDE CHURCH

allels in this controversy. Every judicious investigator certainly recognizes that the virgin birth stories in the Gospels are infinitely more pure and lovely than anything we have elsewhere. The whole question is treated with magnificent reverence and reticence. From an aesthetic standpoint, Matthew and Luke are beyond criticism in their handling of this material. The whole point at issue is not one of beauty. It's a question of fact that is being debated. Is this the truth of history, or the truth of legend? Is it a first century category of thought, or an experience vital for all time? You and I differ in our answers to these questions. But I hope that you will agree that both of us are equally devoted to Christ, and His truth.

One more word. Wouldn't it be a good thing to let this question alone? It does seem to me that to debate it, in an open way, is bound to vulgarize religion more or less. Certainly the Church will never reach any complete agreement in it. Equally devout men hold opposite opinions upon it. In the interest of peace and harmony I suggest that it be considered too delicate a matter to shout about from the housetops. I could not help noticing that you preached your sermon as a Christmas homily. Isn't it best at such a time especially, to avoid such highly controversial subjects, which arouse angry debate, and evoke far more heat than light? I may be wrong, but I often think that this Virgin Birth conflict, as indeed the whole Fundamentalist-Modernist quarrel, is quite inane and barren. We ought to release our energies in fighting real, rather than sham battles. Of course my sympathies are with the liberals. I haven't any patience with the tactics of Machen and MacCartney, especially since their abominable treatment of Erdman. But the big need is not any party victory, but peace in the Church as a whole. I won't attend the Reunion. Are you going? Perhaps some day we will live nearer together.

Cordially Your old Friend,

"Soe"